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Second Series

PAPERS FOR WAR TIME No. 20

9403
War, This War and
The Sermon on the Mount

By

B. H. STREETER, M.A.

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HUMPHREY MILFORD

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BASIS OF PUBLICATION

This series of Papers is based on the following convictions :

1. That Great Britain was in August morally bound to declare war and is no less bound to carry the war to a decisive issue ;
2. That the war is none the less an outcome and a revelation of the un-Christian principles which have dominated the life of Western Christendom, and of which both the Church and the nations have need to repent ;
3. That followers of Christ, as members of the Church, are linked to one another in a fellowship which transcends all divisions of nationality or race ;
4. That the Christian duties of love and forgiveness are as binding in time of war as in time of peace ;
5. That Christians are bound to recognize the insufficiency of mere compulsion for overcoming evil and to place supreme reliance upon spiritual forces and in particular upon the power and method of the Cross ;
6. That only in proportion as Christian principles dictate the terms of settlement will a real and lasting peace be secured ;
7. That it is the duty of the Church to make an altogether new effort to realize and apply to all the relations of life its own positive ideal of brotherhood and fellowship ;
8. That with God all things are possible.

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WAR is possible only in a civilization which is not yet Christian; nevertheless, this country was and is morally bound to fight out this war. Such in brief is the contention for which this series of Papers stands. But, it may be objected, is such a position really tenable? Are not those more consistent who say that the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount will not under any circumstances countenance war? 'My Kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight;' and is it not mere common sense to argue that the wholesale massacre and maiming of hundreds of thousands of innocent persons is the worst possible way of furthering the reign of peace and goodwill on earth?

Plausible as this objection is, and able and sincere as are many of those who urge it, I believe it to be profoundly mistaken. It is not war which is the real evil but the state of mind which leads to war. War at least has its nobler side—not so the domineering temper, the suspicion and hatred, the lust for aggrandizement and wealth which result in wars. War is but a symptom, it is against the disease that the Christian should contend, and at times he must be prepared literally to use the knife.

Christianity is neither a code of law nor a system of ethics; it is a summons to adventure. Christ came not as Lawgiver or Sage, not as a superior Moses or a superior Confucius, but as Captain of a forlorn hope. Christianity and Prussianism are at one and the same time closely akin and bitterly opposed. Both strive for the empire of the world and the dominance of their own *Kultur*. Both call for hardness and discipline; both elicit heroism and sacrifice. But to the Christian world-empire means the Kingdom of God, and its *Kultur* the spirit of liberty and love. As the aims differ, so necessarily do the methods employed; but Christianity *is* war. Every follower of Christ must serve on some crusade. Thus the Sermon

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on the Mount is not to be read as a set of rules and regulations but as a battle-song—the Canticle of the Knighthood of the Cross—not its letter but its spirit matters.

Let us try to apprehend this spirit.

‘Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ Man’s instinct for vengeance reckes not of limitation. ‘Were every individual hair a life my great revenge hath stomach for them all.’ ‘Reward thou them, O Lord, sevenfold into their bosom.’ But the Law laid down a limit. For injury done let a strict equivalent be exacted, an eye for an eye—no more. The *lex talionis* is the first great step forward. But Christ asks more than this, ‘If a man smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.’ The injured Christian is to seek for no reprisal at all, however ‘just’ the equivalent; the instinct of revenge is to be utterly repressed. But even that is not enough. Not only is revenge to be renounced, it is to be transformed into the contrary passion. ‘Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you.’

The aggressor, like oneself, is, potentially at least, a child of God, a brother whose good is to be sought. The extent to which that good is sought and gained is the final test of motive and of conduct. In a particular case it may be that this end will be best attained by literally turning to him the other cheek, in another case it may be better attained in a very different way. A soft answer does not always turn away wrath, and experience shows that, where remonstrance has failed, punishment sometimes succeeds in producing a changed heart. If such cases ever occur, as I would submit they do, though rarely, the hard blow is surely *on that occasion* a more Christian act than a soft answer. Nevertheless, such is the infirmity of human character, such the subtle power of self-deception in the human breast, that when an injured party returns the blow, saying and even thinking that he does it ‘for the aggressor’s good’, he is oftenest mistaken. The literal strictness of the Quaker may be—in my opinion it is—an error, but in most cases it is an error in the

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right direction. The true Christian will always begin with the policy of the soft answer; only if that fails will he consent to try a coarser way. And that it will sometimes fail the Gospel also recognizes—‘If thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican’ (Matt. xviii. 15–17).

‘Love your enemies,’ verily and indeed—but it is also written, ‘thou shalt love thy neighbour.’ Take as literally as you like the words, ‘If a man smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also’—yet there is one thing they cannot mean—‘If a man smite thy sister on the cheek look the other way.’ If a wanton injury is threatened to one weaker than myself and I have power to prevent that injury, then, if I fail to exercise that power, I become morally a *particeps criminis*, and no casuistry can absolve me from complicity in the injury itself. No act is more essentially Christlike than the deliverance of the oppressed. Even if in a particular case the threatened party would be willing in the name of Christ to submit to the injury, it is no whit less my duty to prevent the wrong being done—if possible by persuasion, if not by force. The knight-errant riding the world in search of distressed damsels to succour is as good a Christian as the Quaker literally turning the other cheek.

‘If possible by persuasion, if not by force’ I have written, but it is just to the addition of the words ‘by force’ that many thoughtful men, Christian and otherwise, will demur. Can force ever, it is asked, prevent wrong? And, if so, under what circumstances and with what limitations? On the answer to this depends the answer to the further question whether a Christian can ever justify war.

Our ancestors had a wholly exaggerated view of the

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moralizing influence of force, especially as exhibited in the form of punishment. The legislator revelled in the gallows, the schoolmaster in the rod, the preacher in the fires of hell. An acute reaction from all this has led many modern thinkers to deny that the use of force can under any circumstances serve a moral or educative purpose. In fact in some quarters there seems to be an almost Manichaean outlook—as if force were something evil *in itself*. Force, like matter, is neutral, and only becomes good or evil according to the use men make of it. Many people forget that discipline must precede liberty and that the Gospel must follow the Law. Were the world really Christian the Gospel would suffice, but in a world—and a Church—which is scarcely beginning to be Christian we cannot yet altogether dispense with the Law.

Self-engrossment is a standing weakness of human nature, and very often we are startled to find that even persons of a kindly disposition and of high ideals are curiously obtuse to the claims and interests of others when these happen to conflict with their own. This obtuseness, combined with the instinct of vanity and self-assertion, which from early infancy is a conspicuous element in some, and is to some extent present in most characters, readily leads the individual to take for granted in himself or herself a certain native superiority which bestows a quasi-moral right to domineer. Where such a claim is met with non-resistance, or with a resistance which is readily overcome, the character rapidly acquires that domineering insolence and tendency to wanton aggression which the Greeks described by the untranslatable word *ὑβρις*. One who has never ‘burnt his fingers’, as the saying is, can easily fancy himself a superman.

The strength of this tendency to domineering insolence or *ὑβρις* varies enormously with individual temperament, and its potency in later life depends largely on the wisdom or the unwisdom of early training. In such training the wise parent and the wise schoolmaster will rely in the first place upon personal influence and moral suasion; where this fails they will be compelled to resort to punishment—that is, to the use of force. There are some theorists

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who hold that punishment can, and therefore should, be dispensed with. Given a perfect parent or a perfect schoolmaster, bringing up a child in a perfect environment, this might be possible. Even amid the demoralizing influences of this imperfect world there are a few who come near to achieving it. But very few parents or teachers have the exceptional character to enable them to do this ; and experience shows that in our present stage of moral progress the average parent and the average schoolmaster can only dispense with punishment at the price of producing that ethical disaster known as the 'spoilt child'.

Children are punished not because they are physically immature but because they are morally so, and whenever grown-up persons still show conspicuously that they are morally immature, the fact that they are physically grown up is irrelevant. *ὑβρις* unfortunately is rarely eliminated in childhood, and in the greater power and freedom of maturer years the consequences of *ὑβρις* are far more serious both for the offender and his victims. Hence the need for the policeman and the magistrate.

ὑβρις is the precise opposite of the quality of mercy. It curseth him that gives and him that takes. In a world where all injured persons were perfect Christians, ready not only to turn the other cheek but also to love the smiter, aggression would still do moral harm to the aggressor by feeding his already overweening *ὑβρις*, but it would do no moral harm to the injured party, for it would call out new depths of Christian activity. But in the actual world in which we live the aggrieved are far from being perfect Christians, and aggression breeds in them, not love for their enemies, but envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. This is not a mere matter of theory ; it is a fact of experience. In countries like the Balkan States, where violence and injustice have run riot for centuries, the general moral level cannot be compared with that of countries in which law and order have long prevailed. And it may safely be affirmed that the moral level in each of the various countries of the world varies exactly with the impartiality, efficiency and

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humanity of its system of administering justice and the length of time it has enjoyed good government. The work of the policeman and the magistrate may not be strictly evangelistic, it is at least a *præparatio evangelica*. Tolstoi, with the passion of a convert and the persuasiveness of a genius, has urged that the literal carrying out of the precept, 'Resist not evil,' involves the abolition of the machinery of justice as well as that of war. In logic he is right. But the business of a Christian is to work out, not the logic of a phrase, but the redemption of the world.

There are, however, many who accept the literalism of Tolstoi without his logic, who admit that in education, and in the administration of justice, the use of force may subserve a moral end, but deny that this can ever be the case where force takes the form of shedding blood, who feel no scruple against the employment of the policeman but decline to call in the soldier. I confess I fail to see the rationale of this distinction. The baton of the policeman would be powerless were it not known that in the last resort it has behind it the rifle of the soldier. When a body of desperadoes is prepared to resist the enforcement of the law with arms, it is only with arms that the law can be enforced. To maintain that the State is justified in using force, provided that it stops short at the shedding of blood, is to compel it to abrogate its function whenever a more than usually ferocious band of criminals appears—that is to say, just on those occasions when it is most needed. The Sidney Street incident is a case in point. But though the authority of the law depends ultimately on the rifle in reserve, the actual calling in of the soldier is admittedly a confession of the failure of the law—if we may use the term 'law' to cover the social and economic organization of society in general, as well as the actual administration of justice. It is only where there is something defective in the social organism that the conditions arise in which the soldier has to be called in. In this country, with all the imperfections of its legal and social system, circumstances which call for the enforcement of the Riot Act occur but rarely. In an improved society

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they would never occur. The duty, then, of the Christian is to do what in him lies to further this improvement, but if in the meanwhile circumstances arise which demand that justice, or at least such relative justice as such circumstances admit of, can only be upheld by force of arms, he will not deprecate their use.

But what about war? War raises questions which seem to go deeper than the ethics of the Riot Act. An aggressive war, it needs no saying, cannot be justified; but what of a war in self-defence, or in defence of weaker nations? Granted that some nation wantonly breaks the world's peace, and sets about to pillage or enslave another; may that other nation or its allies meet war with war? May the Riot Act be read over the offender? Can an 'indictment be brought against a whole people'? Where is the tribunal to decide the case? And how can a punishment be just or beneficial which inevitably falls with equal severity on that portion of the nation which was guiltless of the outrage and that which was responsible? Minorities desire, and government declare, war; peoples suffer from it.

The irrationality and the injustice inevitable in any war, on behalf of whatever cause, need little explication. War is and must be evil. Yet I would urge that under certain circumstances, the Christian will choose it as the lesser evil. History shows us that what I have spoken of as *ὑβρις*—incapacity to tolerate an equal, obtuseness to the claims and rights of others—is a fault of nations as well as of individuals. France and Britain have not been immune from this blatant national egoism. Germany, with characteristic thoroughness, has even made a gospel of it. But in a nation the consequences to others of such a spirit may be catastrophic. It leads to a policy of conquest which may mean for centuries the oppression of millions. And oppression, except in the case of quite unusually gifted characters, inevitably means degradation. Virtue no doubt *can* exist in spite of slavery, but liberty is the mother of self-respect, and where self-respect is made difficult, virtue rarely abounds. A nation fighting for its liberty is fighting for a moral end.

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Germany, so it seems to us, has forced on this war, has set out deliberately to 'crush France'—what a sum of misery is implied in such a phrase!—coercing Belgium by the way, while her ally 'chastises' Servia, with the ultimate ambition thereby to dominate Europe, and through Europe the world. Some one *ought* to set themselves to prevent the contemplated oppression, to vindicate the liberty and the public law of Europe. Britain, France, and Russia have taken up the task.

But who are we, and who are our allies, that we should take upon ourselves to play the magistrate, to read the Riot Act, and to order troops to fire on a disturber of the peace? What reader of history can fail to ask that question? What likelihood is there that we and our allies will rise superior to ancient rivalries, to humiliations old and recent; what chance is there that we shall judge the case with absolute fairness and exact no more than the punishment deserved? A German may well ask that: and there is the great difficulty. In international affairs there is no impartial authority to enforce the law. In international affairs Judge Lynch is the only judge, and his justice is, at best, a rough justice, at the worst, no justice at all. What then? Because no ideal tribunal is forthcoming, is the offender to go unchecked, to the detriment alike of his own and his victim's moral sense? Surely not. The Christian may hope that in the future, somehow or other, whether by some further development of 'Holy Alliances' or of Hague Tribunals and the like, some means will be found of securing a relatively impartial tribunal with coercive powers to enforce its verdict. But till that is done he must recognize that Lynch law is better than no law, and under certain circumstances he must be prepared to draw the sword.

But what, we must ask, is likely to be the effect of such coercion on the offending nation? Can Satan drive out Satan? Will aggressive militarism be killed by force? We cannot tell, but history at least shows that Chauvinism, as it is fed by victory, is sometimes cured by defeat; 1870 changed the character of France, and the humiliating fact that it took a world-wide

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Empire three years to subdue two Boer Republics has done much to cure another country of the same disease.

A view fundamentally opposed to what I have maintained has been popularized of late, which is sometimes called the 'martyr nation' theory. It is contended that war will end when, and only when, some nation is prepared totally to disarm and to take the consequences. Some of those who advocate the theory anticipate that the moral effect of such an act would be so great that no other nation would as a matter of fact attack it by arms or rob it by diplomacy. Others think that more probably the nation would have not only to be willing to suffer, but would actually have to suffer spoliation and oppression.

On this theory I would remark: (a) Such action would have no moral value, unless the vast majority of the nation were in favour of it. A minority or a bare majority temporarily in power would have no *right* to carry out such a policy. I may, for Christ's sake, suffer my own goods to be despoiled; I have no right to compel my neighbour to do so. (b) It would have no moral value, unless the nation really understood what it was doing—that is, unless the majority of citizens had come to put a very different value on the good things of life, as against abstract principle, to what they do to-day. If a householder who is ready to hand over a burglar to the police; if a tradesman who is ready to sue for his debts; if a workman who is ready to strike against a reduction of wages, votes for total disarmament, he can only do so because he does not really grasp the meaning and possible consequences of the policy. No nation will be prepared in the name of Christ to face the possibility of abject poverty and possibly of virtual slavery as well, realizing fully what these mean, rather than go to war, until the vast majority of its individual members have reached a stage of moral development hitherto undreamt of. But the inter-relation and inter-action of humanity is such that no one nation can be very far in advance of the general level of civilized peoples, and no nation could reach the stage of ethical

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development contemplated by the martyr-nation theory, until the rest of the civilized world had also reached a stage at which war would long ago have become impossible.

Wars arise because nations are quarrelsome and self-seeking ; and nations are that because the individuals composing them are so. Change human nature and wars will of course cease, but I am not content to wait so long as that. Human nature *can* be changed—that is what Christianity exists to do—but it will not be soon, and the change will not be effected entirely, or even principally, by talking. Nations for centuries to come will have disputes to settle ; what we have to do is *to find some way of settling them other than war*. When nations have got out of the habit of always expecting to fight each other, they will begin to understand each other—and in proportion as they do this they will have fewer disputes to settle. We are on the way to becoming Christian, and therefore wish to abolish war, but we cannot really become Christian till long after wars have ceased. The abolition of war must be worked for as a necessary stage in the improvement of human nature, not waited for as the crowning result of that improvement.

How is this to be begun ? Some tell us that martyrdom will at any rate be needed, of individuals if not of nations. Rumour has it that in Germany Socialists have consented to be shot rather than take up arms. Martyrdom is never wholly wasted, and such actions will at least make others think. But such a course is not open to an Englishman. In this country a conscientious objector may suffer indeed, but never unto death ; and yet nothing less than death would count at all in this matter. Two million men at arms to-day are ready to die for England, and one who would seem a martyr must not do less than these. But in this country, at this moment, and in this cause, martyrs are not the prime need. It is only at the start that great causes require martyrdom ; afterwards they need patient thought and hard work and a long course of minor and

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unnoticed sacrifice. A. . .tyrdom advertises problems ; it does not solve them. In this country the cause of peace and the sinfulness of war need no advertisement ; and if the shedding of blood counts, it will soon be so in every country in Europe. At the end of this war there will assuredly be the will for peace. In a country where Christians are also voters, it is their business to see that there is also the way. Christianity is a spirit, but it is not one that dwells in the air. Good intentions are as worthless without good machinery, as machinery is without ideals. There was a time when every country gentleman who had a dispute with his neighbour about a rod of land settled it by the battle-axe. Yet in those days there was no lack of men to decry anarchy and extol peace. Peace within the State was secured only when, backed by the goodwill of such men, there had arisen an impartial central authority strong enough to coerce all who would not accept its verdicts. The human conscience is notoriously less sensitive to the claims of international than to those of individual morality, and if within the State we have not yet risen to the stage of dispensing with force, how much less so in things international. Peace between nations will be secured, not by the better-minded nations renouncing armaments, but by their being willing to put their arms, for the purpose of coercing the recalcitrant, at the disposal of some impartial tribunal, or, failing that, of some alliance sufficiently wide to be relatively impartial. No such machinery would work perfectly at first ; the international ethic of which it would be the expression is too rudimentary as yet. But the instinct of international, like that of national justice would grow stronger in proportion as it was enforced, and the improvement of international ethic would react on the machinery which gave it expression.

But in the meantime what has the Christian to say to war, and in particular to this war ?

The *entente* policy of Britain during recent years—like the older guarantee of Belgian neutrality—was undoubtedly intended to preserve peace. Unfortunately,

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many if not most Germans regarded it as offensive in intention. It may be that but for this impression the war-party in Germany would not have been able to force on a crisis; it may be that, but for the *entente*, they would have done so earlier. But wise or unwise, Christian or un-Christian, the policy was approved of by at any rate the majority of those in this country who interest themselves in these problems. The choice which Britain had to make last August must be judged in relation to the situation of last August, not in relation to the situation which would have existed if during the previous half-century all the diplomatists of Europe had been wiser, and all the nations more Christian, than was as a matter of fact the case.

This country was bound by treaty to resist the violation of Belgium, it was bound by an honourable understanding—an obligation not less but more binding—to assist France if in our judgement she was wantonly attacked. Even at the level of pagan morality we could not refuse that help. And if a pagan nation could not have refused it, still less could one professedly Christian. It is true that it was to our interest to prevent the subjugation of these countries, seeing we had fair warning that 'our turn would come next'. But the fact that it is to one's interest to keep an obligation in no whit detracts from its binding force; it merely deprives one's action of any special credit. There is, however, a further consideration which goes deeper than questions of treaty-obligation. The subjugation of Belgium or the 'crushing' of France does not merely mean some alterations of boundaries on a paper map; the happiness of millions for generations to come is at stake. Such phrases cover an outrage to humanity and a calamity for civilization. If so, to resist is essentially a Christian act, and if effective resistance is only possible through war, war with all its horrors and iniquities becomes a Christian duty. From the purely Christian standpoint, Britain ought to have intervened even if no interest, *entente* or treaty had been involved. Britain is not Christian enough to have done that—had she

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been so, probably other nations would also have become Christian enough to have made the original aggression impossible. But the fact that Britain would not have intervened, unless interest and honour had pointed the same way as abstract right does not make intervention the less a Christian duty; it merely precludes us from pluming ourselves on any special nobility of ethic. We have but kept our plighted word; 'Do not even the publicans the same?'

In a war of this kind what is the duty of the individual Christian? Surely whenever it is the duty of a nation to fight it *must be* the duty of the individual citizen to contribute his share in the fighting. (I speak, of course, only of the able-bodied male, free from compelling ties, and not serving his country in some other equally indispensable capacity.) Nor is such duty in any way proportionate to the extent to which he personally approves of the object of the war. In any war, just or unjust, the difference between victory and defeat has immense economic consequences. Were the British fleet sunk to-morrow, in three weeks Britain would be starving, Germany overflowing with plenty. When war is once declared the individual cannot separate himself from the fortunes of his country. Even if he is doubtful as to the original obligation of his country to take part in the war he simply cannot wash his hands of it. The only choice now open to him is to eat his bread in safety at the price of other men's blood, or to buy safety for those weaker than himself at the risk of his own blood. When the choice is between sacrificing self for others, or letting others be sacrificed for self, it cannot be doubted which is the more Christian course.

But many who clearly recognize this yet feel a difficulty. 'Love your enemies,' said Christ. How can I be said to love those whom I will to bayonet? Is there not a confusion here? 'Your enemies,' in the text, means those who have done you a personal wrong. The individual soldier has no personal grudge against the individual in the trenches opposite. On occasion he will even fraternize with him. In war the opposition is

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usually—there are, of course, exceptions—quite impersonal. It is the cause, not the individual enemy, that is fought against. If an innocent individual is acting as the instrument of an evil cause, it is better that he should die than the evil cause should triumph—at least if the evil is on a sufficiently large scale. It is better that some thousands of Germans should die, fighting nobly for what *they* believe a just cause, than that millions of Belgians and Frenchmen should live for generations under a degrading tyranny. And the soldier who causes their death does not act in hate. Soldiers rarely hate, they normally respect, their enemies, and respect is the beginning of love. ‘Tomorrow’, said a Saxon to an Englishman on Christmas Day, ‘I fight for my country, you for yours.’

Again, ‘Love your enemies’ does not mean love your enemies more than your friends. ‘Love *all* men, *even* your enemies’—that is what our Lord teaches. Now if by ‘love’ we mean the exact emotional regard that we have towards our nearest and dearest, to love one’s enemies is impossible; but no less impossible is it to love all men. Christian love is not primarily emotional. ‘Wish well and do good to’ is the essential thing; and it *is* possible to wish and to do good both ‘to them that hate you’ and to all men. If the soldier is convinced that with the cause for which he is fighting is involved the welfare of humanity as a whole, including, therefore, in the long run that of Germany also, he can not only shoot the German in the trenches opposite without any feeling of personal dislike, but he can do so for the love of man. And this is not only possible, it is what in nine cases out of ten is actually being done.

But all this concentration on the fact that the soldier, like the executioner, is bound sometimes to take life, obscures the really vital point. The soldier is before all things a man who is ready to *die* for his country; and readiness to die for others is essentially a Christian thing.

PAPERS FOR WAR TIME

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